

Thank you for reviewing our draft patient guide. We greatly appreciate your time and insights.

Once we collect all feedback, our writers and designer will edit the guide based on what we hear. This can include making it shorter and easier to read. To see an example of a final guide, please see our recent patient guide for [Low Back Pain](#). (Note: All guides may look different.)

When you're finished reading the draft patient guide, please fill out [this survey](#) by **June 27, 2019**.

**Health Quality
Ontario**

Let's make our health system healthier

IMAGE TBD

Talking About Alcohol Use Disorder

questions to ask your health care team to help you
receive high-quality care

Why it's important to talk about alcohol use

You might be worried about the way alcohol affects you. Maybe you think about alcohol too often, can't control how much you use, drink to calm yourself down—or feel sick or anxious when you stop drinking.

If you think about your alcohol use, how it makes you feel, and the space it takes up in your life, the details could point to a condition known as alcohol use disorder.

Alcohol use disorder can put your health and safety at risk. It can also influence other areas of your life—your work, relationships, and family.

That's why it's important to learn as much as you can about how alcohol use disorder is treated and managed. Your doctor, nurse practitioner, or other health care professionals can help you:

- Determine if you have alcohol use disorder
- Create a care plan
- Manage withdrawal symptoms
- Treat the disorder

With their help, you can manage your alcohol use and improve your quality of life. This guide is designed to support you along the way.

Did you know?

Speaking to a health care professional about your alcohol use can be difficult. But it can help to know that you aren't alone and that a lot of support is available to help you feel better.

Write it down

It can help to take notes as your symptoms develop and change. Having details on hand when you talk with your health care professionals will help you describe your experience accurately.

You can use this guide each time you visit and review your care plan with your care team.

Determining if you have alcohol use disorder

Finding answers about alcohol use disorder starts with screening: family doctors, emergency departments, and mental health specialists all routinely ask about alcohol use.

If screening shows that your alcohol use puts you at risk, your doctor will ask some more detailed questions about the bigger picture, such as any other health conditions, your mental health, alcohol withdrawal symptoms, and any possible problems with other substances.

Share with your care team:

.....
How you're feeling physically and emotionally

How you feel about your alcohol use (for example, scared, confused)

Who you'd like to be part of your care (a friend or family member)

Specific concerns about your alcohol use

What your life is like at school, home, or work, and about any situations (such as with family, friends, or your job) that might affect your alcohol use

"It gets easier. We can move from a place of fear ... to comfort, support, and awareness."

PERSON WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDER

Did you know?

Trauma, for example, from bad experiences in childhood, accidents, or violence, is one reason people are more likely to develop alcohol use disorder. Your care team should acknowledge that trauma may play a part in your alcohol use. You do not have to share the specific details of your trauma; but know that your care team can help you find treatment with appropriate trauma services, if you need them.

Ask about: your care plan for alcohol use disorder

Recovery from alcohol use disorder is a journey, and a care plan can help you along the way. Your care plan will include your goals for recovery and the steps you can take to help you get there.

Start thinking about your goals even before you meet with your family doctor, nurse practitioner, or counsellor so that you can develop your care plan and make treatment decisions together. Your goals might include reducing the number of drinks you have in a day, or even stopping altogether. If you're not sure about what goals to set, you can talk about that with your care providers too.

The care plan you develop with your health care professional will focus on education about alcohol use disorder and on proven treatments. Your care should also be respectful of your culture and personal preferences, and incorporate treatments and therapies that fit with your values. Your health care professional should share the risks and benefits of each option to help you decide what's best for you.

Keep in mind that your plan will change over time as your recovery progresses. You should continue seeing your health care professional on a regular basis for ongoing support.

Ask your care team:

What steps can I take to meet my treatment goals?

How can I get treatment for other substance-related or mental health issues?

What role can my family or caregiver play in the care plan? What information or education about alcohol use disorder can I share with them?

Tell your care team:

.....
If you have had treatment for alcohol use disorder in the past

Learn more

[ConnexOntario \(1-866-531-2600\)](https://www.connexontario.ca/) is a free, confidential information and referral service that is available 24 hours a day, every day. They can:

- Listen, offer support, and provide strategies to help you meet your goals
- Provide basic education about problems with alcohol or mental health
- Provide contact information for treatment services or supports to meet your needs

Ask about: counselling, support groups, and medication

Treatment for alcohol use disorder often includes counselling, which can involve a trained therapist who talks with you one on one or in a group. Another option is a peer support group, which brings together people in recovery to talk through their experiences. Your treatment could also include medication that reduces cravings for alcohol.

Everyone's care plan will be different, and you might try different therapies before finding the right combination. Your care team will work with you to find the right therapies based on your needs and goals.

Ask your care team:

How do I find the right counsellor or support group?

How effective are support groups? How will I know if their approach is based on evidence?

Is there a cost for counselling or support groups?

Are there medications that can help treat alcohol use disorder? What are the risks of taking medication?

Will I have to pay out of pocket for this medication?

“My counsellor helped me understand that part of the disease is negative self-talk. I learned to recognize the addict in my head talking. Until you meet someone who understands, you don't feel you can be loved again.”

PERSON WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDER

Did you know?

There are programs called managed alcohol programs that may be helpful for you. These are sometimes found in shelters, so they can provide a place to live as well. People in these programs are prescribed an alcoholic beverage at regular intervals to help stabilize their drinking patterns.

“The process at first is very scary. I felt humiliated. Talking to someone in recovery helped me feel comfortable. It is critical to have a community that understands what you’re going through.”

PERSON WITH ALCOHOL USE DISORDER

If you’re a caregiver ...

Caring for someone with alcohol use disorder comes with its own questions and concerns about helping them. Make sure that you get the information and support you need during their treatment journey.

Ask the care team:

Where can I learn more about alcohol use disorder?

How can I support someone with alcohol use disorder?

What supports or resources are available to me, as a caregiver? (for example, counselling, support groups, workshops)

Ask about: withdrawal

Withdrawal occurs when you have used alcohol for some time and stop suddenly. Your body can react with symptoms such as anxiety and nausea, or even vomiting, tremors, or high blood pressure.

Withdrawal from alcohol is different for different people. Some people stay at a treatment centre where they can receive help during withdrawal. Other people choose to go through this stage at home. If your symptoms get worse and you need help, go to the hospital for treatment and support.

Ask your care team:

.....

What should I expect from withdrawal? How long can it last?

Do I need withdrawal services? How do I get them?

Will I have to pay for these services? What would withdrawal care at a treatment centre cost?

“How do I know if I should go to the hospital?”

If you're having difficulty managing your withdrawal symptoms and aren't sure what to do, you can call **Telehealth Ontario**. A registered nurse will take your call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This service is free and confidential.

- Toll-free: 1-866-797-0000
- Toll-free TTY: 1-866-797-0007

For your reference: the quality standard in brief

Health Quality Ontario is committed to helping patients, health care providers, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

We know that not everyone across the province receives the right care, every time. So, to help address gaps in care, we produce quality standards that outline **what quality care looks like** for specific conditions and situations, such as alcohol use disorder. Quality standards are based on current best evidence and input from patients, caregivers, and health care providers.

This patient guide accompanies the quality standard on unhealthy alcohol use and alcohol use disorder.

If you're interested in the quality standard, below is a summary. To read more, you can [download it here](#).

Screening

For clinicians: People who present to the emergency department, mental health care, primary care, or other settings are screened for unhealthy alcohol use and alcohol use disorder using a validated tool.

What this means for you

When you visit your doctor or nurse practitioner for routine checkups, they should ask you a few questions about your use of alcohol.

Brief Intervention

For clinicians: People who screen positive for unhealthy alcohol use are offered a brief intervention.

What this means for you

If you have unhealthy alcohol use, your doctor or nurse practitioner should work with you to help you lessen the amount of alcohol you drink or to stop drinking completely.

Comprehensive Assessment

For clinicians: People who may have alcohol use disorder are offered a comprehensive assessment that informs their care plan.

What this means for you

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner should ask you about your physical and mental health, your medical history, and any other substances you are using now or have used in the past. If you have alcohol use disorder, they will use this information and work with you to create a care plan to help you.

Care Plan

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder have an individualized care plan developed in collaboration with their health care professional that includes appropriate services and treatment goals. Care should be seamlessly integrated, interprofessional, and, where possible, provided in primary care.

What this means for you

Your family doctor, nurse practitioner, or counsellor should work with you to create a care plan that includes your treatment goals and appropriate services. This care plan should be based on your needs and respectful of your culture and personal preferences.

Treatment of Alcohol Withdrawal Symptoms

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder who have withdrawal symptoms are offered rapid access to treatment and support tailored to the severity of their symptoms.

What this means for you

If you have stopped using alcohol and are having symptoms (such as nausea, vomiting, tremors, or irritability), your health care professional should offer you help. Depending on your preferences and how bad your symptoms are, this help might include staying at a treatment centre or taking medication.

Information and Education

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder and their caregivers are offered information, education, and support appropriate for their needs and preferences.

What this means for you

You should be offered education about alcohol use disorder. This information should cover treatment options such as counselling, peer support, and medication (as well as its side effects), and it should be offered in a format that works best for you. If you want, your caregivers, such as family or friends, can also be offered this education.

Psychosocial Interventions

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder are offered information on psychosocial interventions that address their needs and preferences.

What this means for you

Your health care professional should offer you options for support. These could include counselling—one on one or in a group—or peer support. They will help you choose the option that best suits your needs, preferences, and goals.

Medications to Reduce Alcohol Cravings or Consumption

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder are offered information on medications that reduce alcohol cravings or consumption and address their needs and preferences.

What this means for you

Your family doctor or nurse practitioner should tell you about medications that could help you. They should let you know about the benefits and risks of each medication and help you decide which medication might work best for you.

Alcohol and Concurrent Health Disorders

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder who also have a mental health disorder, medical disorder, or substance use disorder are offered treatment for any concurrent disorders.

What this means for you

If you have a mental health or other medical condition, or you use other substances, your health care professional should offer you treatment for this too.

Monitoring, Support, and Follow-Up

For clinicians: People with alcohol use disorder are offered ongoing follow-up with their health care professional on a regular basis to monitor treatment and response.

What this means for you

Your health care professional should make appointments to see you regularly to make sure your treatments are working. If they're not working, your health care professional should work with you to change your treatment plan, keeping in mind your needs and preferences. If you want, you can invite your caregivers to these appointments too.

What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your care providers will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is meant as only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your care professionals. It's important to speak to them about any other questions or concerns.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on alcohol use disorder, read the quality standard at: hqontario.ca/qualitystandards

ISBN TBA (Print)

ISBN TBA (PDF)

© Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2020